

Which merit badges are the toughest? We asked two brothers who earned them all



Richard (left) and Joseph Mercado of Troop 1439, Pathway to Adventure Council.

Ask 12 Scouts to select the toughest merit badge they've earned, and you might get a dozen different answers.

But ask two brothers, each of whom earned all 137 of the **BSA's available merit badges**? You'll get two sets of answers that underline the brilliance of the BSA's merit badge program.

Joseph and Richard Mercado are Eagle Scouts and members of Troop 1439 of the BSA's Pathway to Adventure Council, based in Chicago.

In their pursuit of every available merit badge, the brothers explored existing interests, discovered new hobbies and enjoyed a firsthand look at potential future careers.

That's what I love about the merit badge program. Whether a Scout earns one merit badge or every single one, they walk away with a deep appreciation for a specific subject and learn which areas simply aren't for them.

That's not to say that Joseph and Richard's toughest merit badges are ones they disliked. In fact, some of the most meaningful and memorable badges are the ones that challenge Scouts the most.

Four merit badges appear on both brothers' lists. Each brother included exactly two Eagle-required merit badges on his list — but not the same two.



Joseph works on the Whitewater merit badge.

Joseph Mercado's Top 10 Toughest Merit Badges

10. Traffic Safety

"There was a lot of information, including rules and regulations," Joseph says.

But once he was old enough to work toward a license, Joseph says the badge "definitely helped build the foundation for driving classes."

[See the requirements](#)

9. Small-Boat Sailing

A windy lake (remember, this is Chicago) can test a sailor's perseverance. Joseph learned this — and how to overcome it.

"We flipped the sailboat multiple times," Joseph says. "This was not supposed to happen."

[See the requirements](#)

8. Swimming*

Joseph says the requirement to bring an object up from the bottom of the pool was a good lesson — but a tricky one.

"It was challenging to get the brick at the bottom," he says.

[See the requirements](#)

7. Backpacking

Joseph's pack seemed to get heavier mile after mile as he felt every ounce of his gear. But he learned how to reduce the discomfort.

"Proper posture and leg strength were key factors," he says.

[See the requirements](#)

6. Water Sports

As a first-time water skier, Joseph "had difficulty trying to balance on the skis."

But the first time he got up on the skis? That made it all worthwhile.

[See the requirements](#)

5. Cycling*

A 50-mile bike ride requires more than endurance.

"You need to be mentally and physically prepared," Joseph says.

[See the requirements](#)

4. Skating

"Balance and practice are key factors" when skating, Joseph says.

This merit badge placed high on Joseph's list because, as he was skating backward for one of the requirements, he lost his balance and broke his ankle. Good thing he was wearing a helmet.

[See the requirements](#)

3. Bugling

"I could never forget this merit badge," Joseph says.

He says it took him an entire year of guidance, practice and patience to finally learn the instrument well enough to complete the requirements.

Bugling's difficulty may be one reason why it's regularly one of the [least-earned merit badges](#).

[See the requirements](#)

2. Whitewater

For Joseph, the Whitewater merit badge was a fun way to reinforce the skills he learned while earning the Canoeing merit badge.

“You need to be both physically and mentally ready for the challenges of Mother Nature,” he says.

[See the requirements](#)

1. Scuba Diving

When Joseph worked on the Scuba Diving merit badge, he was dealing with some lingering effects of a cold, making it difficult to equalize his ears. The visibility that day was low, making navigation tricky.

But in spite of all that, Joseph loved every minute.

“I most definitely would consider it as a lifetime hobby or possible profession,” he says.

[See the requirements](#)

**Eagle required.*



Richard completes requirements for the Horsemanship merit badge.

Richard Mercado's Top 10 Toughest Merit Badges

10. Scuba Diving

For Richard, it was the temperature of the freshwater lake that made scuba diving tough.

"The deeper I went, the colder I got," he says.

But like his brother, Richard enjoyed the experience and freedom of scuba diving.

"I hope one day to scuba in warm saltwater," he says.

[See the requirements](#)

9. Horsemanship

"You never realize how much time is involved in taking care of your horse," Richard says. "Proper cleaning of their hooves. Grooming. Feeding."

And learning the proper way to put on a saddle.

"I became an instant stuntman when I fell off," he says. "Lesson learned: Make sure it's put on properly before climbing on."

[See the requirements](#)

8. Collections

Part of the difficulty in the Collections merit badge was Richard's own doing. He decided to collect police stars.

"It was challenging trying to find the old ones," he says.

But that same freedom to collect whatever you want (other than stamps or coins) is what makes this merit badge so customizable and cool.

[See the requirements](#)

7. Personal Management*

Creating a budget and thinking deliberately about money aren't normal behaviors for teenagers. That's exactly why this merit badge is so critically important.

Because this skill isn't covered elsewhere, this merit badge is often cited by Scouts as one of the toughest.

"I had to keep track of my money," Richard says. Enough said.

[See the requirements](#)

6. Coin Collecting

A needle in a haystack? Try looking for a specific state quarter out in the world.

“It was time consuming trying to find some of the coins,” Richard says.

But that makes the discovery even sweeter.

[See the requirements](#)

5. Skating

Nathan Chen and Bradie Tennell make it look so easy.

But skating — ice, inline or roller — can be tough, as Richard learned while earning the Skating merit badge.

“I had a hard time trying to turn around,” he says. “But once I figured it out, roller skating became a new favorite of mine.”

[See the requirements](#)

4. Small-Boat Sailing

Merit badges let Scouts fail in a safe, controlled environment. That way they’re ready when life just comes along and ... well, I’ll let Richard tell it.

“I kept getting smacked in the head with the sail pole,” he says.

Lesson learned.

[See the requirements](#)

3. Citizenship in the Community*

Richard says researching the history of his community wasn’t easy. He took photos, interviewed citizens and spent time at the library.

“It was time consuming,” he says.

But the journey gave him a greater appreciation for his community and its rich history.

[See the requirements](#)

2. Water Sports

The struggle was real — at least at first. Like his brother, Richard had trouble “learning how to balance on water skis.”

But once he got up on the skis, it was like floating on the water. And that's a feeling you can't describe.

[See the requirements](#)

1. Radio

Learning the art of radio isn't about memorizing which station plays classic rock.

"I had to learn different wave frequencies," Richard says.

Understanding the electromagnetic spectrum and how radio waves carry information connects Scouts to something that's both invisible and vitally important.

[See the requirements](#)

*Eagle required.

But what are the hardest *requirements* for each merit badge?

That's a topic so good it got [its own post](#).

Thanks to the Pathway to Adventure Council's Allison Dietz for the tip.

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